

BOUCHER'S MESSAGE

Brick, Fred

In searching for the famous yarns of the Canadian West, I have discovered, as have so many others, that the Peace River Country is one of the best searching grounds. The Peace River folk, white man and Indian alike, love to tell stories. In an Indian dwelling, for instance, ³⁹three old men may be sitting around the fire at night. After a period of silence the first old man says, "I got a moose today. I was so close to it I could have touched it when I shot. It happened like this: I was out on the shore of the lake which was covered with a sheet of clear ice. Far away on the other side of the lake I saw this great bull moose. I was much too far away to shoot, so I had to think fast. I had my ax with me, and in an instant I had chopped down a small spruce tree. ¹⁰⁰This I tied to my body with cord, resembling as I did so, the trunk of the tree. I then placed my ax, edge down, on the ice, stood on the ax handle and, spreading my capeau like a ^Ssail I fairly flew across the lake straight toward the moose. I was able to come within a foot of him."

There is a period of silence, then the second old man begins, "Yes, you came close to that moose, but I have been even closer than that, and to a bull much larger than yours. Today I was out hunting and was following the track ¹¹⁷⁰of the largest moose I ^{have} had ever seen. I followed nearly all day, and toward evening I could see by the track that the moose was going to turn off and bed down for the night. You know how a moose will do: double right back on his own track, and lie down beside his own trail

so he can hear and scent anything following him. Well, when I saw this moose was going to turn I came around the other way with the wind and spotted him lying beside his trail. I crept up and made a large X on his hoof with my knife. I then went ^{2:00} and fetched my young son. I said to him, 'Son, I have spotted a great bull moose and have put my mark on him. He is mine. I will now take you to the spot so you can shoot this moose and see for yourself that I am not lying.' My son came with me, shot the moose, and found my X on his hoof. My son was very much surprised."

There is another long silence, then the third old man starts his tale. "Yes," he begins, "you both did well, but I had an even more remarkable experience. I was out hunting today and had ^{2:20} only one bullet for my gun. Suddenly I saw two great bull moose standing some distance apart. Which one was I to shoot? I couldn't make up my mind, so I settled the matter by deciding to get them both. Right between the moose I spied a saskatoon bush. I knew how hard a saskatoon will freeze in the wintertime, and this bush was just right for my purpose. I crept up to it, and with my knife I sharpened the side of the bush toward me. I then crept back a little way, took steady aim at the bush and pulled the trigger. Of course the frost hardened bush ^{3:00} split the bullet and half flew right and killed the right hand moose, while the other flew left and killed the left hand moose. I think that is very good hunting."

Yes, Peace River folk love to tell stories! Of course, some of the best Peace River yarns-spinners are men and women who have once lived in the Peace River Country, but for some reason or

other, no longer live there. One of these former long time residents is Fred Brick who now lives in Edmonton.

Fred is one of the very oldest³¹³⁰/living Peace River pioneers. He is a son of a very colorful Peace River Anglician minister, John Gough Brick who set out maple trees at old Fort Dunvegan, raised championship wheat and preached mighty sermons.

Fred comes by his story telling ability naturally, for his father had an ingenious imagination. Fred's father once came upon a gang of men who were resting after strenuous labors. Seeing their condition, Reverend Brick knew that they needed encouragement. He happened to have a small keg⁴⁰⁰/of rum on his wagon, and this he freely opened for the men. They were profuse in their thanks.

"Boys," said the missionary, "I don't want any thanks, but I am supposed to preach down at the river tomorrow, and if you all showed up it would be a big help to me."

The boys showed up in a body, for here was a preacher they could understand. When he began to speak, Reverend Brick said, "Now, boys, I don't want you to do as I do, that would get you into a lot of trouble. But if you do as I say, you'll be all right." He then gave them a thundering good⁴³⁰/sermon.

One afternoon while I was visiting with Fred, I asked him what experience in the Peace River Country he especially remembered. Without hesitation he said he remembered a particular trip he made up the Peace from Vermillion with an Indian named Boucher. Here is Fred's story, just as he told it to me:

"I was trading in the North," said Fred, "in partnership with my brother Ally. One year Ally wasn't able to go with me on our annual spring trip downriver, so along about the middle of April, 1894, this Cree Indian, Boucher, and I loaded a raft with goods at Peace River and floated down to Vermillion, three hundred miles. We then loaded the goods onto pack horses, went one hundred miles west to Hay River, traded for furs, returned to Vermillion, packed up the furs, put them into a large canoe and started the long, hard journey upriver to Peace River Crossing.

"It was no easy trick poling a heavy canoe up the swift Peace, but Boucher was a wonderful canoeman. He could handle with the greatest ^{5.30} ease the twenty-five foot birch pole used to move the canoe, and he had a technique few men could duplicate. He would stand in the canoe and, holding the pole at the center, would "roll" it over and over, shooting the canoe ahead so fast the bow would sometimes stand clear out of the water.

"It was then the twentieth of June," Fred continued. "Nobody had come downriver that season except myself. At that time there was no mail coming into the country. It was a land of utter / 6:00 loneliness and rarely heard the sound of a human voice.

"On June twentieth, about three in the afternoon, Boucher suddenly stopped poling. He said to me, 'Boss, I've got to go ashore!'

"It's not time to eat," I replied, "'let's travel!'

"But Boucher said 'no'. I've got to go ashore.'

"So we turned the canoe into the bank. Without saying

another word, Boucher climbed the bank, made himself a smudge fire to keep off the mosquitos, and sat down with his back against a pine tree.

"I didn't know what to think. Boucher had been a wonderful companion / 6:30 . . . a marvelous worker. He was also rather remarkable in that he could speak in Cree, Chipwayan, Beaver, English, and French. I would have trusted him with anything, but I could think of no reason for his present strange behavior.

"However, I went about the task of building a campfire, boiling water for tea, and fried up a bunch of eggs . . . may sound strange to you that we had eggs. Well, they were given to me by Mrs. Lawrence of Vermillion, the earliest settler there. You can bet I packed 'em carefully. / 7:00 Eggs were a real luxury.

"When I had dinner ready, I called to Boucher to come and eat.

"'I will not eat,' said Boucher.

"'Are you sick, Boucher?'

"'No.'

"'Then what's the matter?'

"'You wouldn't understand,' Boucher

"Boucher just stared into his fire. I couldn't get another word out of him. I saw the Indian wouldn't move any farther that night, and I knew we must camp. I went to the canoe, brought the bed rolls, and sticks for the mosquito bar. I fixed my own bed and had begun to fix Boucher's bed, when he said, 'I will not / 7:30 sleep tonight.' I just stood and stared at him. and

"You can bet I was becoming more and more puzzled. Never before had Boucher behaved like that. However, I cooked supper, prepared my blankets, and went to sleep. I didn't sleep well since I was worried about Boucher, and I kept waking up. Whenever I awoke, I saw Boucher in the same position . . . just squatting beside his fire.

"I got out of bed at four o'clock, built a fire, cooked breakfast, and called to Boucher to come and eat.

"I will not eat', said Boucher.

"By this time ^{8:00} you can bet I was mighty worried. I went over to Boucher and said, 'Boucher, what's the matter?'

"You wouldn't understand,' *Boss*.

"I couldn't get another word out of him. I took the situation as philosophically as I could, completed my breakfast, and since I was tired, went back to bed. I slept until late in the afternoon.

"At noon I fixed grub and called Boucher again, but the Indian only shook his head.

"Well, I was beginning to think we were marooned on the banks of the Peace for good, but about two o'clock that afternoon, ^{8:30} Boucher got up. Without saying a word to me he fixed himself something to eat. When he had finished he grunted, 'Let's travel.'

"While we were packing up, I asked, 'Boucher, what was the reason for this delay?'

"'You wouldn't understand,' said Boucher, but he got a good look at my face and pretty soon he continued, 'I was getting a message, Boss. Last night a baby girl was born to my wife, and the child lived two hours.'

"Well, can you wonder that I thought Boucher had gone crazy? There we were, ^{9:00} about halfway between Vermillion and Peace River Crossing. Not a soul had passed that way but ourselves all season. There was no mail, no telegraph. Yet here was this Indian claiming to have had a message from God-knows-where that he was the father of a baby girl that had lived two hours.

^{checked,} "'Boucher, have you gone bats?'

"'We will travel,' replied Boucher.

"Well sir, we did travel that afternoon. Boucher worked like a madman. At time he poled so hard and so fast that I feared the canoe might burst apart. He refused to stop ^{9:30} for supper, and poled until ten o'clock that night. At ten o'clock we went ashore and made camp. But Boucher hardly slept and was eager to start at three the next morning. Boucher worked like a fiend! That day we made a day and a half of ordinary upriver travel . . . about thirty-five miles. If you think that's not good traveling, try poling a heavy canoe up the Peace sometime. The next day we made the same distance. In the afternoon, the following day, we passed a place where an old half-breed named Pat Wesley lived. ^{10:00} Wesley came out of his shack as we went past, and I called to him, 'Hey, Wesley!' The old fellow came down to the shore and we turned in.

"'Wesley,' I asked, 'What's the news?'

"'No news,' said Wesley. 'Nothing's happened.'

"'Boucher,' I said to the Indian, 'that was a dream you had. You see, nothing's happened.'

"'Boss,' replied the Indian, 'You don't know what you're talking about. That message came to me, and it must be true.'

"Well, about five miles above the Wesley place we met some men taking out logs. ^{10:30} I called to them, 'Anybody been born, died, or married?'

"'Haven't heard of anybody.'

"This time I just looked at Boucher and didn't make any remarks. We got to within seven miles of Peace River and were poling the canoe under a cut bank when we heard somebody call out to us from the bank above. I looked up and saw my brother Ally. He had been watching for hus and there he was, holding the reins of his saddle horse.

"Boucher ran the canoe ashore, and Ally came down the bank, Boucher and I got out of the canoe, built a fire, ^{11:00} and put the kettle on. After a while Ally said, 'Boucher, I have bad news for you.'

"'I know,' replied Boucher.

"'You know,' asked my astonished brother, 'that three nights ago a baby girl was born to your wife, and that the child lived only a few hours?'

"'I knew when it happened,' replied Boucher. 'I told the Boss, but he laughed at me. If you don't mind, I'll take your horse and go on home.'

"Well, Boucher took Ally's horse and rode away. Ally and I poled the canoe on home. But I've wondered ^{11:30} ever since about that message Boucher got in the night. There are strange things in the North. Stranger things than anybody knows about

When Fred Brick had finished his story it was getting dark. We sat for a while in silence, then I said:

"That was a curious happening, Fred. But tell me -- and leaving the curious and the unusual for a moment -- what do you think is the outstanding characteristic of the northern folk?"

Fred thought for a little while, then he replied, "In the old days the answer to that was easy. ^{12:00} Generosity and thoughtfulness . . . especially to strangers. I recall a traveler who once left his watch hanging on a limb while camping on the trail. It was two or three weeks before he could get back to the same spot, and of course, he thought the watch would be missing. But when he returned he found the watch hanging exactly as he had left it, and what is even more interesting, it was running! Somebody had come along and wound it for him!

"Then, of course," Fred continued, "there was the custom in the North Country of never locking your cabin door. When a man left his cabin, he'd usually cache some food there, so any traveler who might be lost or out of grub himself, could stay alive. There was seldom anything stolen. Travelers as a rule left things in as good shape as they found 'em. If they couldn't repay what they had taken, they'd usually pass some grub on to some other needy traveler. That tradition of thoughtfulness was strong in the North."

Fred's House
When I finally got up to leave, neither Fred nor I noticed that my wallet had slipped out of my pocket to the floor. I didn't miss the wallet until I'd reached my residence -- on the other side of Edmonton. But Fred's black cocker spaniel noticed it, picked the wallet up, handed it gravely to his master who then made the long journey across town to return it to me. . . . the Northern spirit of thoughtfulness still lives!

Thompson
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8:30 - 4:30